

A Narrative on the Token Deaf Character and How to Dissolve It

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Abstract

The Deaf Community is rich in culture, yet is not represented frequently in the entertainment media industry today. Films and television shows should strive to be more inclusive of minorities, such as deaf and hard of hearing individuals, who have much to offer and deserve to be visible in such mediums. There are several examples of quality portrayals, like that contained in *Children of a Lesser God*, *Switched at Birth*, *Veronica Mars*, and *The Sandlot 2*, among others. The issue is that these portrayals are few and far between. And, often times, when individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing are included in the media, they lose their personality in favor of showing their disability. The truest way to represent the Deaf Community in film and television, is to create complex characters with unique personalities and goals separate from being deaf.

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Table of Contents:

Introduction: The Representation of the Deaf Community in Television and Movies

1. Pity Me Not
2. Television & Movies
3. The Matter of the C.I.
4. Why Deafness Should Be a Characteristic and Not a Character

Introduction:

When it comes to television and movies, there are many things that are being done right. Female empowerment in the form of thoroughly developed lead characters, for example, have come quite a long way in the past few years. This is an issue that was prevalent and, arguably, is still relevant today. But, looking back at television shows and films of the last decade, we can see that headway has been made. We can see that the efforts of those pushing for quality female characters is finally paying off.

With that said, I want to bring up another issue that I think can be resolved in a similar manner. This would be the underrepresentation of deaf and hard of hearing individuals in entertainment media. We are being presented with a problem, and I think we have all the means of fixing it if we do a little research and take a little initiative.

The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) has a position statement on its website about the "Portrayal of Deaf and Hard of Hearing People in Television, Film, and Theater." It recognize that the portrayals of such individuals in the entertainment industry "have a significant impact on the public image of our community." This stands to reason as many people don't have the opportunity to interact with deaf or hard of hearing people on a day-to-day basis. This means their knowledge of, and experience with, this community is limited almost entirely to what they see on television or on the big screen.

The NAD present a very clear and very understandable position on this matter. It simply asks that, for true authenticity, deaf and hard of hearing characters be played by deaf and hard of hearing individuals. It asks that characters written with these characteristics be well-researched to obtain the best and most accurate view of its rich culture. Research is really the best way to

discover what is correct when it comes to terminology, myths and facts, and overall lifestyle. The NAD finishes up its statement by saying that “audiences have the right to portrayals of deaf and hard of hearing people that show us as we are so that increased understanding, acceptance, and equality for all will be achieved.”

Using that quote as a foundation for my research, I present to you a thesis on the importance of accurately portraying the deaf and hard of hearing communities in television and movies. I will discuss how to write characters that are strong, genuine, ones that do not evoke pity from the audience. I will describe some of the successes and failures of movies and television shows to bring us authentic deaf and hard of hearing characters, talk about the matter of representation for those who have cochlear implants, and conclude with a walkthrough on how to make deafness a characteristic and not a character.

Chapter 1

I think one of the most crucial components of deaf and hard of hearing inclusion in the entertainment industry is mindset. It is common for people to feel bad for individuals with disabilities. I understand this mindset, and I'm not saying people who feel this way are terrible, awful humans. Rather, at the root of it, I'm sure these people are just trying to be sympathetic. They realize they have something, in this case the ability to hear, that other people do not have and thus feel bad or guilty about it. The good news is—you don't have to feel bad about it! Deaf and hard of hearing people don't want you to pity them. They want you to focus on all the amazing things they can do and not the one thing they cannot.

Deaf and hard of hearing individuals are not incapable, disadvantaged, or inadequate. They are people with full time jobs, skillsets, and abilities just like anyone else. For these reasons, I think it is so important to stress that hearing people should never look down upon or pity those with hearing disabilities. They don't need your pity, because they are doing just fine.

Successful deaf and hard of hearing individuals can be found in a wide variety of occupations. The website Ranker specializes in lists and contains a great one on famous and efficacious deaf and hard of hearing people. The actors and actresses on this list are especially relevant and include Marlee Matlin, who has won both an Academy Award and a Golden Globe for her work in the film *Children of a Lesser God* and has been nominated for numerous other awards, Shoshanna Stern, who is known for her roles in the television shows *Weeds* and *Jericho*, Katie Leclerc, who is known best for her work on *Veronica Mars* and *Switched at Birth*, Linda Bove, who taught children sign language in her role as Linda the Librarian on *Sesame Street*, and Sean Berdy, best known for his roles in *The Sandlot 2* and *Switched at Birth*. These talented individuals have made a living acting in film and television, because they are talented, dedicated,

and hard-working. Being deaf may have provided some obstacles, but it did not stop them from achieving their goals.

There are so many other notable individuals who have excelled in their chosen paths in other industries as well. For instance, in 1995 Heather Whitestone was the first deaf woman to win Miss America. Shelley Beattie was a famous bodybuilder who was featured on *American Gladiators* as “Siren” for four years. Dummy Hoy was a Major League Baseball player, as was Curtis Pride, who now holds the position of head coach for the Gallaudet University baseball team. Jim Kyte was the first deaf player to play in the National Hockey League.

Nyle DiMarco is probably the most recent deaf actor to make headlines when he won *Dancing with the Stars* this year (2016). He also won America’s Next Top Model in 2015, and starred in the hit television show *Switched at Birth* in 2014. This goes to show that any person can be a jack of all trades—regardless of disabilities. It’s the person that makes the difference, not the hearing.

Chapter 2

A large portion of what is wrong with the representation of deaf individuals in the media today isn't necessarily an inaccurate depiction, though that is part of the problem, but, rather, a lack of visibility overall. There are some great examples I'm going to talk about where films and television shows feature deaf individuals as main characters with good story arcs and personalities, but those examples are few and far between. Seeing deaf people more frequently is the ultimate goal. They should be included in a variety of capacities, not just lead roles, in more films and television to show that they do make up a good part of our population.

With that said, I would still like to focus on some pieces that did a great job with deaf and hard of hearing representation and some that didn't quite make the mark. To start, I want to discuss one of the most well-known films containing a deaf lead, *Children of a Lesser God*. This film, featuring Marlee Matlin and William Hurt, takes us to a school for the deaf where Sarah (Matlin) once was a student and has chosen to remain to work as a janitor. James (Hurt) is a new hearing teacher that is hired to teach speech classes.

The two do share a chemistry from the start, but Sarah recognizes that James wants her to speak, of which she is highly opposed. He wants to, without really knowing it, "help" and "fix" her to fit into this mold. Sarah rejects his advances for exactly this reason. Sarah is portrayed as a very independent woman. She is lonely and isolated, by choice, because she feels the world refuses to understand her. We see this in scenes with her mother who, despite her love for Sarah, cannot wrap her head around her deafness to understand her daughter. We come to learn that she was actually diagnosed as mentally retarded until the age of 7. That is especially difficult, and I know that that was something many people had to undergo in real life too. Deafness was often misdiagnosed as a mental disability many years ago.

What makes this film so fantastic, is that we are given a character who is completely content with herself. She may waver at some points, a little nervous here and there, but, overall, she is proud to be deaf and wants to be accepted as such. James grows to learn this through mistakes. One big error is when he takes her, as his date, to a work party where they are gambling. Sarah happens to be quite good at poker, but, when she wins, instead of congratulating her, they congratulate James for “doing such a great job with her.” I think that’s the turning point where we really see James realize the error of his ways. He also gets a fresh perspective when Sarah is speaking with another colleague completely in sign language. He gets to see her completely in this element and realizes that he is trying to change her too much.

This film, though half of the dialogue is in American Sign Language, does not have subtitles. James does repeat some of what Sarah signs, other bits we are able to pick up with context clues. I think it is very unique for not having subtitles, and that it conveys the message of acceptance even further. This film, unlike many others I have seen, focuses on a deaf person’s life and her struggle to just be who she is. I think there is value both in movies that portray a deaf person’s situation and ones that portray a person who just happens to be deaf. This is an exception, because it is telling a story that hadn’t been told before through narrative. It doesn’t use Sarah’s deafness as a means to an end or simply to fuel the plot.

Another positive is the ABC Freeform television show *Switched at Birth*. This TV show has broken down barriers in terms of deaf and hard of hearing visibility. In the show, the characters discover that two teenage daughters, Bay and Daphne, were switched at birth. Now, their families come together to spend time with both children.

Daphne is an oral deaf character, meaning she speaks and signs. Bay is hearing. We get a fantastic balance between seeing individuals from the deaf Community, such as Daphne’s

classmates at Carlton School for the Deaf, her best friend Emmet who is a deaf and does not speak, among others, and individuals from the other areas of Daphne and Bay's life. The show is able to give us insight as to what it is like in a deaf school, and show that not all deaf people are mute—some talk, some make sounds and some do not. It broadens our view of deaf individuals by not putting them in a box. It also gives each individual specific characteristics aside from being deaf.

We also get to share this learning experience with some of the hearing characters like Bay and her parents, John and Kathryn Kennish. They don't know all the social faux pas at the beginning, so they say incorrect things, and they act in awkward ways sometimes. To me, that is absolutely beautiful. If you are dropped into another culture, it doesn't matter what culture it is, you're not going to know all the rules right away. You aren't going to know what is accepted and what is frowned upon. You are going to make some mistakes, and that's okay! As long as you learn from them, that's all that matters.

And, believe me, we learn plenty from the Kennish family. That is why it is so great that this show does let us see their trials and tribulations. If they did everything perfectly, the show wouldn't be accurate, and it also wouldn't help audiences learn anything. This show combines drama, interesting and well-developed characters, with a new backdrop for people to explore and learn.

A much smaller example, a scene from *The Sandlot 2*, features a character named Sammy. Sammy is the little brother of one of the baseball players who always ends up getting in trouble at the kissing booth at the fair. When our characters arrive at the fair, Sammy's older brother gives him a stern talking to about staying away from the kissing booth. Sammy signs, and the brother speaks with some signs thrown in as well. They are behaving just as any pair of

siblings would, and then, Sammy goes over to the kissing booth, steals a pair of platform shoes to meet the height restriction, and makes a big ordeal kissing the girl working the booth.

Just like that, a character fulfills his goal without it pertaining at all to the fact that he is deaf. I think that makes this a fantastic example of deaf representation. Sammy is a young boy, a little brother, and a big player. The fact that he happens to be unable to hear doesn't affect his storyline one bit! It's a characteristic unique to him, just like his blue eyes or red hair.

Next, we have an episode of the television show *Veronica Mars*, titled "My Mother, the Fiend." In this episode, teen-sleuth Veronica is trying to figure out why her mother received suspension back in 1980. She follows the clues until they lead her to a friendly lunch lady named Mary. She approaches Mary, calling out her name, but Mary does not look up. A boy from behind her says she can shout as loud as she wants, but the lunch lady doesn't talk. Then, he says, "She's retarded or deaf or something."

Now, I certainly don't like this language being used in a derogatory manner, but I feel that it does accurately depict how a lot of people portrayed deafness in the 90s. The redeeming aspect, however, is that Veronica explains how her mother had learned sign language as a young individual and had taught her the alphabet. So, Veronica is able to communicate with Mary, with some difficulty. She attempts to read Mary's fingerspelling, but misinterprets the word "friend" for the word "fiend," in relation to her mother, thus sending her temporarily in the wrong direction.

What's nice about this portrayal is that a few different mediums are used to communicate. Veronica and Mary both fingerspell some words at the beginning, and then, at the end, they use a notepad on a computer to type out longer sentences. It's great to see our

protagonist ensuring she gets all the information by trying out different methods of communication, and not assuming or writing off Mary just because she cannot hear.

The show never makes you feel bad for Mary, even though some students say nasty things about her. Veronica Mars, as a student, was very much an outcast among her peers. They frequently berated her and said nasty and rude things about her and her family. I think that's how the show executed this inclusion in a way where we accepted the circumstances but didn't pity Mary. We, as an audience, were very used to the good characters being verbally attacked.

The last positive depiction I would like to mention is *Resident Evil: Retribution*. In this film, we follow our protagonist Alice through two "realities". In the first, she has a family. An adoring husband and a beautiful daughter. Her daughter, Becky, is either deaf or hard of hearing, though it is not explicitly stated one way or the other. In this reality, Alice and her husband know how to sign fluently and do so to communicate with Becky. In the second, they are in Raccoon City which has been contaminated with a virus that causes zombification, among other atrocities.

Overall, the movie itself wasn't considered a hit, but the portrayal of Becky was done quite well. Alice and her clones, which are revealed throughout the movie, protect Becky and continue to sign with her even amidst the outbreak. They have to listen to each other and truly communicate in order to survive the horrors outside suburbia.

As for one representation that didn't necessarily make the best impact, I have to mention the television show *My Name is Earl*. Now, this show is one that is built off the idea that its characters usually mean well but are very politically incorrect and ignorant. With that said, there were still a few aspects of the show that didn't quite meet the standards necessary for appropriate portrayal.

To start with, we are introduced to Ruby, who is a successful lawyer. When our main characters enter her office, they are immediately inconsiderate and rude to her. She chooses to speak some and sign some (she has a speaking interpreter with her), and Joy immediately starts cackling at the way her voice sounds. It is uncomfortable to say the least. They also refer to her constantly as “my deaf lawyer” instead of just saying “Ruby” or “my lawyer.” And, they also say that she is hearing impaired, a term which is deemed “inaccurate and not acceptable” by the National Association of the Deaf along with “deaf-mute” and “deaf and dumb.”

Now, to say this is an inaccurate depiction of a situation isn't necessarily true. I think that there are individuals out there who are unfamiliar with the Deaf Community who would make these mistakes. They would say incorrect or offensive phrases without meaning to be malicious. But, the difference here between the trials of the characters in *My Name is Earl* and those in *Switched at Birth* is that the characters in the former make mistakes that receive laughter. Their ignorance is used as a means of entertainment and humor. That might work effectively if we could ensure the audience knew the mockery was actually at Earl and Joy saying things incorrectly, but, as it stands, I think many people would mistake the joke as being one pointed at the lawyer who cannot hear and speaks with a speech impediment.

Chapter 3

The cochlear implant, also referred to as a C.I., brings about an additional facet to the portrayal of the Deaf Community in television and film. Before we dive into the issue of characters with cochlear implants in television and movies, I want to state up front that this chapter will not be a dialogue on the controversial arguments regarding these devices. There is still much tension surrounding this topic within the Deaf Community. Thus, I will be taking an entirely neutral stance on the matter, while objectively discussing the representation of such individuals in the specified media.

While doing research on different shows and movies inclusive to deaf and hard of hearing individuals, I stumbled upon a blog post called “Hidden in Television: A Marginalized Portrayal of Deafness on *Switched at Birth*.” I was intrigued because, like I discussed earlier, *Switched at Birth* is one of the most groundbreaking television shows in terms of showing a mostly signing Deaf Community and a partially deaf cast. But, Alana Kilroy, the author of this blog post, shared her concerns about the show having too small of a scope when it came to deaf portrayal.

Alana is a deaf individual with cochlear implants. She, quite furiously, writes that *Switched at Birth* “serves as an ‘image’ or representation of the deaf community, when it clearly should not be.” In her mind, the show is a skewed representation of the Deaf Community in that it does not depict many individuals with C.I.s. She believes this gives the message that every deaf person signs or is mute. She also states that this show “creates awareness to SAB [*Switched at Birth*] viewers that, we, as cochlear implant users, automatically know ASL, associate only with deaf people, and attend deaf schools.”

I want to start by analyzing her complaints about the show. She believes that this show, not having any main characters with C.I.s, is painting a false representation of the Deaf Community, and she feels underrepresented, as a minority, in this show. I can certainly understand how a show that a person cannot relate to would feel far less appealing. That makes perfect sense. However, I think it also has to be noted that Alana mentions that individuals with C.I.s aren't limited to deaf schools and don't associate only with deaf people who speak ASL. For that reason, I feel that a lot of her argument loses value when you realize that *Switched at Birth* is a show that follows a girl who is deaf, speaks American Sign Language, and attends a deaf school. That will certainly set the parameters for characters. It doesn't mean the show is purposefully neglecting individuals with cochlear implants, and I don't think not having a character with a C.I. in this environment would somehow create the illusion that such individuals only exist within this environment.

The most interesting part of this blog post for me was the comments section. Many individuals, deaf and hearing, had some rebuttals to this argument. Surprisingly, they were all very professional and quite insightful too. There was very little hatefulness, which I took as a great sign. I don't usually do my research on topics in the comments section of blogs, but in the interest of learning more intimately about a particular community, I feel it is acceptable supplemental information because it comes straight from those affected.

The first comment that caught my eye was a girl in Argentina. She is hearing but has been deeply involved in the deaf and signing communities for a while. She makes a valid point when she says that she doesn't see *Switched at Birth* as depicting "a ridiculously mind-boggling one-sided view of the deaf world" as Alana claims. Instead, this girl points out that the show just shows a "part" of this world. It does show people who are deaf that can sign, those that

can speak some, those that can speak well, and those that choose not to speak at all. It also shows characters who are hard of hearing that stand somewhere in the middle.

This commenter also points out that *Switched at Birth* is “one of the few mainstream venues that show a mostly signing deaf community” in lieu of a story about C.I.s and the “miracle of sound.” In her experience, many media outlets show stories about C.I. users but forget to include the difficulties that come after the procedure—speech therapy, retraining your brain, etc. She enjoys that this show is one of the few representation of a deaf community that doesn’t show its members as “less-than” or “oh poor them,” while simultaneously showing the struggles of deaf characters who have pride in being deaf but also struggle with being happy about it at times.

Marla Crews, a deaf/hard of hearing commenter, points out that Alana’s argument is a generalization and, for the most part, believes the makers of the show have done a good job hiring deaf actors to play deaf characters and can’t really blame them for staying out of the controversy. The show is for entertainment purposes after all. Personally, I feel the show’s writers have made great strides in the industry with their portrayal of, albeit a portion of, the Deaf Community, and I agree with Marla that we can’t really blame them for staying out of deaf politics. She says the show’s central purpose is to demonstrate that deaf people have lives the same as hearing people do.

To wrap up this section, I’d like to make one final rebuttal to this argument. As a viewer of *Switched at Birth*, I have watched many episodes more than once, and I do recall an episode wherein a C.I. was included. Season two episode fifteen was an alternate reality episode (simply meaning a “what-if” episode showing what would have happened under different circumstances). In this episode, our main deaf character Daphne grows up with cochlear implants. We get to see

her live her life-day to day-as any C.I. user would. She doesn't sign, she has great oral capabilities, and she doesn't hang out with exclusively deaf individuals or attend a deaf school. The only negative aspect I would give this portrayal is that at one point Emmet, a deaf non-oral character, sees her C.I. and starts signing to her. This version of Daphne says "Oh, I'm not deaf." But, that isn't to say that every C.I. user feels that way. If this had been the only portrayal of a C.I. user on the show, I think the line should have been omitted to show the pride some C.I. users do have at being deaf. Regardless, this episode aired in 2013 and Alana's feisty blog post was uploaded in 2015. In later seasons, one main character's father does decide to get a C.I.. He is deaf, and still identifies as part of the Deaf Community. I will give Alana some validity in that a character did assume that the C.I. user would know how to sign, but it also showed that this was not the case. So, I fear that without doing all her research, Alana wrote off what would become a very progressive television show.

Chapter 4

If you take anything, anything at all, away from this thesis, I pray to whatever deity you believe in that you take this chapter and its contents at face value. When I watch television shows or pop in an enticing movie, the biggest turn off for me is the “token” character. This character is a cookie-cutter character, one with no real point other than to poorly attempt to make a show seem inclusive, hip, or edgy (depending, of course, upon which variety of token character this particular piece chooses to capitalize on).

Before we dive in, let me give a more in-depth explanation of a token character. These characters don’t have deep back stories nor do their plots go much beyond one particular trait. Usually, this trait is ethnicity, sexuality, or disability, though of course there are many more than that. What makes token characters particularly frustrating is that they are generally created from the foundation of stereotypes. They become the embodiment of that stereotype which stunts their development as a character and doesn’t allow them to fully form and connect on a deeper level in the story. As a writer, I believe it is crucial to create characters who have many different traits. You cannot create a character and make one characteristic their entire personality. It isn’t realistic, and it isn’t good writing.

Some common examples of token characters are: the token Asian student, the token gay or lesbian person, the token African American person (usually referred to simply as the “token black guy”), or, in the case we are specifically discussing here, the token disability student. It is sad to see characters like this created. Not because these archetypes don’t deserve some quality screen time; in fact, it is quite the opposite. These characters deserve to *be* characters.

The token Asian student is put on screen to make low quality jokes about Asians being great at math or school. Or, on the flipside of that, they are put on screen to laugh at that one Asian student whose parents disown him or her, because they are bad at math or school. This is the case with Ming in MTV's show *Awkward*. She is an Asian teenager who is not good at math, which is considered "odd" or "wrong." The token African American person is put on screen to demonstrate how not racist the show writers are and/or to create an illusion of diversity. The token gay or lesbian characters are put in shows to try and be inclusive but end up making the entire life of said characters based entirely around sexuality as if they have no other extracurricular activities with which to fill their time. These characters are often included to make a show seem edgy, racy, or "young and hip."

Lastly, characters with disabilities such as being deaf, blind, or in a wheelchair, are often included simply to show inclusion. They too take on a role that usually centers around their disability and how hard their life is. This isn't to say their lives aren't hard, or that their disabilities don't present challenges, but, I highly doubt these individuals are really consumed with their disabilities every moment of the day or that they would want characters portraying similar traits depicting them as such.

ABC's new comedy show *Speechless* captures this idea perfectly. JJ is a young boy just trying to survive the trials of high school. He happens to be in a wheelchair and is unable to speak. He communicates using a laser-pointer and a letter-chart. JJ doesn't let his disability prevent him from attending school functions, like football games, going to group study sessions, hanging out with friends, or even flirting with girls. In fact, he talks about how much he just wants to do "normal teenage stuff" without people drawing attention to his disability. This show is a great representation of how individuals with disabilities should be depicted.

My suggestion to this problem is to have writers take a second when they are busy writing to count up how many traits each character possesses. If they have but only one trait, that's a red flag. Two traits will take you down to a yellow caution flag, and three traits will get you to a green ready to go flag. To me, this is a good rule of thumb. Not only will it make characters more interesting, but it will also keep them out of token territory.

When writing about an individual who is deaf or hard of hearing, it is important to remember above all that they are people. They face "normal" everyday problems just like everyone else on the planet. They still have to buy toothpaste, stand in line at Walmart, and get the oil in their cars changed. Sure, they have different obstacles to deal with along the way, but they don't let that define their lives. Similarly, they don't want that to define their characters in television or movies either.

Imagine how amazing it would be to see a female character on TV deep undercover on a narcotics trail. She's in deep, maybe too deep, seconds away from being busted, but she just so happens to be great at her job. Every moment is suspenseful, the trailer is captivating, you have to tune in for the premiere. You flip on the TV, already impressed with the spunk and bravery this character is showing and *then*, you find out not only is she a strong lead, but she is also deaf! Deafness should not be the only defining characteristic of any character. It should be one of many. Make a character who does many things and is *also* something else. Never make that something else the most defining trait. To the Deaf Community, deafness isn't a disability, it's a way of life—and we should start writing like it.

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